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SUBJECT: BARAK APPROVES NEW SETTLEMENT CONSTRUCTION

Classified By: DCM LUIS G. MORENO FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) and (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Minister of Defense (MOD) Barak since April 2008, has approved dozens of construction permits for residential and municipal projects in the major settlement blocs and in a number of smaller settlements. This construction, if completed, will pave the way for continued population expansion in these areas. Israel in the past has justified similar construction projects as necessary to meet the growing demand for housing in the larger settlement communities, a point that Israeli officials probably will highlight when justifying this latest round of approvals. However, some of these construction projects are slated for smaller settlements independent of the larger blocs and settlements located to the east of the security barrier. Construction in these areas seems to contradict Israel's previous justification for continued settlement construction and undermine its commitment to the Roadmap. End Summary.

ADJUSTING FOR POPULATION GROWTH IN THE SETTLEMENT BLOCKS

¶2. (C) Barak in recent months has approved permits for construction projects in a number of the larger settlement blocs, which many Israeli officials claim will remain part of Israel following a peace agreement with the Palestinians, according to an Israeli press report on November 14. Israeli officials probably will argue that approval of this construction does not contradict Israel's adherence to the Roadmap because it is in response to natural population growth in these areas and falls within the boundaries of existing master plans. Reports say that Barak signed permits for the registration and publication of future construction projects--although the roadmap prohibits advertising settlement expansion--in Ariel, Modi'in Ilit, Ma'aleh Adumim, Mevo Horon, Efrat, Neveh Daniel, Oranit, Alon Shvot, Har Adar, and Givat Ze'ev. This report states that he approved the marketing of dozens of housing units and plots of land in Beitar Ilit, Ma'aleh Adumim, Efrat, and Ariel. Barak also issued permits to construct a commercial center in Efrat and a cemetery in Ma'aleh Adumim, which do not directly address the concern of population growth, according to the same press report, and indicates that Israel is considering retaining these settlements in the context of a two-state solution.

CONSTRUCTION OUTSIDE OF THE SETTLEMENT BLOCS

¶3. (C) Israeli press also reports that Barak issued permits for construction in a number of smaller settlements outside these major settlement blocs, which seems to contradict Israel's standing commitment not to build in these areas. According to the press report, Barak authorized the

construction of 60 homes in the settlement of Eshkolot near Hebron. Although this settlement is situated to the west of the security barrier, the actual construction site is in an isolated area several kilometers away from the population center, which could allow settlement leaders to eventually expand the municipal boundaries and the overall size of the settlement. Barak also signed permits for the construction of houses in Beit El, Kochav Ya'akov, and Talmon, granted permission to an Israeli water company for construction plans in Qiryat Arba, and authorized construction of an "experimental electricity production farm" near Mount Hebron, according to Israeli press. All of these settlements are located to the east of the security barrier and are clearly independent of the major settlement blocs.

COMMENT

¶4. (C) Barak's decision to authorize further construction in these settlements appears to be in line with his policy of both compromising with settler leaders and expanding settlements within the major settlement blocs. He has made efforts to reign in the expansion of settlements outside of these blocs, as well as larger outposts, by offering carrots to settlement leaders in exchange for cooperation, most recently seen in his attempts to relocate the Migron settlement closer to the major settlement blocs. However, his decision to authorize the construction of housing in a number of settlements to the east of the security barrier (the furthest, Talmon, is approx. 7 km from the barrier) may indicate a further concession to settlement leaders, and

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signal his willingness to consider these communities as part of a larger settlement bloc that Israel would seek to retain in the framework of a final peace agreement.

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